

Mission Critical

Communications staff and programs are vulnerable to the budget ax. Considering the demands you face, it's a hard call, but this is one 'soft' service you can't afford to do without

When it comes to cutting budgets, so-called “soft” services like staff development, human resources, and communications often get the ax first. Faced with tough budget choices, this may seem like a reasonable response—until employee productivity, student performance, and public support start to sag.

That's because the “soft stuff” some school leaders are so quick to cut comprises key components of organizational culture. And research shows that culture determines whether organizations can adapt quickly to changing environments and sustain gains year after year.

In other words, developing people and improving squishy processes like teamwork, project management, and employee communications represent mission-critical work. For a people-intensive business like education, where the bottom line is measured in student achievement gains and growth, the “soft stuff” really is the hard stuff.

The organizational glue

Stanford University's Jeffrey Pfeffer has found that organizations that treat people well tend to outperform those that don't by as much as 30 to 40 percent. When people feel valued and team accomplishments are recognized and celebrated, employee productivity increases exponentially.

This is especially true for knowledge workers like teachers and school administrators—for whom intrinsic motivators like helping children learn, doing meaningful work, and celebrating team successes matter more than bonuses and other financial incentives.

Not surprisingly, according to Pfeffer, well-designed, supportive organizations with well-trained, yet ordinary employees achieve more than poorly designed systems stocked with star performers. That's because the quality of human interactions is what determines results, especially in a people-intensive

business like education.

And the quality of human interactions largely boils down to how well people listen to and communicate with one another. Acting as organizational glue, communication binds people to a common purpose and to each other.

In organizations in which communication is viewed as a strategic management function, information and ideas flow more freely from bottom to top, top to bottom, and inside and out. There are fewer surprises and less organization-induced stress. Distractions are kept to the minimum as the organization supports, rather than hinders, the work of its employees.

Ultimately, students benefit. Happy employees do their jobs better, and they have more fun doing them. Happy employees also are more likely to come up with the kind of creative solutions needed to close the achievement gap or break the stranglehold poverty has had



on student learning for generations.

With massive teacher layoffs occurring across the country and more superintendents adopting big business's "rank and yank" approach to staffing, job satisfaction and morale among public school employees may be at an all-time low.

"When we went into education, we knew we were making a sacrifice financially, but we had job security," said one veteran North Carolina classroom teacher. "Now, even tenured teachers don't have any job security. It's really scary."

More needed, not less

Scared, stressed employees simply aren't going to perform at their peak. At times like these, more communication is needed, not less.

If the entire communications team gets cut, who will craft the message? If the school public relations professional or team survives but budgets are slashed and critical communication channels are decimated, how will they share information effectively with the rest of the organization and the public?

Most schools and districts have more communications firepower at their fingertips than they realize. Now's the time to pull out all the stops and start using e-mail, websites, blogs, podcasts, videocasts, electronic newsletters, mass notification systems, cable television, and other tools to communicate with employees.

Keeping messages concise, clear, and consistent is important. Generally, the more complex or emotion-laden a topic is, the simpler the communication needs to be. Since few things in life are more complex or more personal than a child's learning or a person's job, keeping things simple makes good sense.

In terms of developing effective messages, this means writing and speaking in an active voice and using straightforward syntax and declarative sentences. Using everyday language and illustrating key points with analogies, images,

and examples will help audiences grasp and recall key ideas more easily.

Avoid jargon. Even educators don't like off-putting terms like "differentiated instruction," "progress monitoring," and "behavioral supports." The same holds true for budget information in which the lineup of acronyms can make employees' eyes roll in their heads.

Take the time to explain where the money comes from and where it goes, and what the different budget categories mean. Many school employees, including classroom teachers, don't understand that 80 percent of most district budgets go to personnel, for example, or that 80 percent to 85 percent of most district personnel are already school-based.

Employees need to understand that flat-lining the central office or cutting all district communications won't solve the budget crisis facing public schools today. Being transparent about the options being considered helps everyone understand the limited choices school officials must confront when trying to cut spending or protect the classroom.

Engage others in the process

Simply sending out more information isn't enough, however. School officials need to engage employees and other key audiences in the budget development process, especially when times are tough.

Study circles, advisory teams, online surveys, focus groups, and other input-gathering and consensus-building techniques help generate better ideas and typically create more buy-in for school and district plans. The key to success isn't which engagement strategy to use, but how well the process is designed and facilitated and whether the design matches the desired goal or outcome.

For example, district efforts likely will fall flat if participants feel they're being asked to rubber-stamp plans that already have been finalized or if the board's decision-making role isn't

explained up front. When participants know early on how their input will be used and what role they will play in the decision-making process, engagement processes tend to go much more smoothly.

The International Association for Public Participation views public engagement as a continuum with five separate and distinct categories: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower.

Implicit in each category is its own "promise to participants." These range from the most basic, to share information about plans and alternatives, to the most complex, to empower others with final decision-making authority.

When things go awry, it's often because the employees, parents, and citizens participating in the process and the government officials facilitating it misunderstand one another's roles and promises.

Straight talk required

With employee morale already sinking, district officials don't need to do anything that will make matters worse. Most understand that the nation's economic woes are far from over.

Employees are willing to make sacrifices as long as everyone shares in them equally and as long as superintendents, school board members, and the public understand that, at some point, "doing more with less" is no longer possible.

Honest, straightforward communication—the kind President Harry Truman preached—is what is needed. Right now, the buck stops in America's classrooms. With America's teachers bearing the brunt of state budget cuts and accountability for results, the pressure to perform has never been greater.

In this kind of environment, "spin" backfires.

While the classroom as pressure cooker may be the new normal for the education profession, the least that we can do is acknowledge how difficult—and important—the work really is.

Teachers need to know we believe in them, and that won't happen if we hide out in the central office.

When times are tough, employees need to see their leaders, and they need to know their leaders care about them as people and as individuals. In big organizations like schools and school districts, it's easy for employees to feel like they're just one more anonymous cog in a very big wheel.

Feeling invisible and disposable isn't good for anyone's mental or physical health, let alone job performance. As Pfeffer notes in his latest book, *Hard Facts*, most leaders overestimate the value of extrinsic rewards in motivating and keeping good employees.

This is especially true of educators, the vast majority of whom enter the profession to make a difference in children's lives. While intrinsic rewards may seem

in short supply with pressure increasing to raise test scores, most educators' faces still light up when talking about that magical moment when a student finally gets a new idea or concept.

Recognizing performance

Applauding individual achievement is important, but research shows that leaders get more traction by recognizing team and organizational performance. This not only costs less, but matters more, especially now that salaries and benefits have taken a beating along with job security and advancement opportunities.

Sincere acknowledgements of good work, handwritten thank-you notes, loudspeaker announcements, marquee "good news" signs, and punch and cookie celebrations yield a big return on a minimal investment in employee good-

will.

As Pfeffer notes, performance is a collective—not just individual—accomplishment. When leaders show that they understand and support this idea, and design schools and district organizations that support school principals, classroom teachers, and other personnel rather than micromanage them, more good work follows.

Since effective communication is part of any well-designed system, wise administrators will invest more time and resources, not less, in keeping employees and the public informed and engaged in public schools. ■

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